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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the need of institutions located within Africa, particularly institutions of higher education, to fulfill the task of generating and applying knowledge relevant to solving the economic, food, and health problems that plague the continent. The paper examines the nature of African universities and the historical context in which they have developed including the fervor of nationalism, the efforts of industrialization, and the rising expectations of the continent's people. Next, an outline is provided of the obstacles facing these institutions. Among the obstacles discussed are: (1) the volatile political situation on the continent; (2) the global negative impact from nations of the North; and (3) the underfunding of the universities. Finally, the paper highlights what are considered the main challenges and the prospects that are offered in trying to meet these challenges. Contains 4 references. (GLR)

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THE AFRICAN UNIVERSITY AND THE CHALLENGE OF ENDOGENOUS DEVELOPMENT IN AFRICA

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THE AFRICAN UNIVERSITY AND THE CHALLENGE OF
ENDOGENOUS DEVELOPMENT IN AFRICA

Africa is in the midst of crises, plagued by hunger, disease, poverty, and a heavy debt burden.

Despite two United Nations development decades extending from 1960 to 1980, the continent, with a population of about 531 million (over 10% of the world's population), is unable to feed herself. Per capita income is lower now than in 1960. The countries of Sub-Saharan Africa are simply worse off than in 1960. This situation exists despite the many external aid projects the continent has had and the tendency of the continent to rely largely on external models and aid. It is time that Africa look increasingly within for solutions. To this end, her institutions are among imperatives for focus, especially the higher educational institutions which should be able to fulfil the tasks of generating and applying knowledge relevant to the needs of the continent. Shaping these institutions to achieve endogenous development is a step urgently needed.

I will begin by dealing briefly with the nature of African universities and the context in which they have developed, mention some of the main obstacles facing them, and highlight what I consider their main challenge and the prospects trying to meet this challenge offers.

For most countries on the African continent, higher education is a development of the twentieth century, unrelated to Africa's ancient universities which were devoted to Islamic studies, the spread of Islam and the unity of the Islamic world. The exceptions in time only are Liberia and Sierra Leone, products of colonization from the Western world. Higher educational institutions in these countries were established in the nineteenth

century, but these experienced slow growth and uncertainties through the first decades of the twentieth century.

Thus, using 1967 - the year the Association of African Universities (AAU) was founded - as a benchmark year, the continent's universities, then thirty-four in number, were young. They were in the Western tradition and staffed mainly by non-nationals. The institutions were diverse and functioned in relative isolation from one another as a result of the forces of colonialism which had dominated the continent for more than a century.

Their development was affected by the revolutionary changes on the global scene during the period between the mid 1950's and 1970's which followed the declaration of the Atlantic Charter and the end of World War II. For Africa, there were such evidences of rapid change as:

1. The wave of political independence, accompanied by a fervor of nationalism.

2. The efforts at industrialization, urbanization, and entry into the modern world.

3. The rising expectations of the continent's people, particularly the ordinary man and woman.

At first, there was the euphoria of independence and self-government, at which time there seemed to be a drive for development and, consequently, a surge in interest in the development of higher education. Financial outlays by Governments were substantial as was the support of international Agencies such as UNESCO. There was quantitative expansion at all levels - those at primary and secondary school levels triggering expansion at the higher educational level. Concepts of higher education as privilege for a few gradually altered as higher education became available at public expense for many.

This state was soon followed by coup d'états which replaced established constitutional governments, most of them new, with military governments which were to set the tone for developments through the next decade and beyond. By 1984, more than half of the countries of the continent were under military rule or quasi-military rule (Sandbrook, pp. 85-86), with the resulting disruptions, instabilities, violence and economic crises. In this volatile context, the development of African universities was to proceed. The AAU, which sought to bind these universities, struggled with them to solve a number of problems, two major ones being:

1. breaking the barriers of isolation between the member universities and establishing cooperation among them;

2. creating an identity for the African university.

What is the African university? During the 1960's, African scholars began to play a major role in university education and to give serious thought to the idea of a university. In 1972, at a workshop organized by the AAU in Accra, Ghana, using the theme, "Creating the African University", they identified and analyzed problems facing the universities and stated:

> The emergent African university must, henceforth, be much more than an institution for teaching, research and dissemination of higher learning. It must be accountable to, and serve, the vast majority of people who live in rural areas. The African university must be committed to active participation in social transformation, economic modernization, and the training and upgrading of the total human resources, not just of a small elite. (Yesufu, p. 42).

This represents the special task of the African university as conceived by its scholars, but the African university shares a bond with universities everywhere by its commitment to the disinterested pursuit and advancement of knowledge. Like them, it also has an obligation to the environment in which it is established and which should nurture it.

Universities, like other institutions, grow and become dynamic as they provide positive responses to the needs and challenges of their environment. Universities are, therefore, at one and the same time similar and yet remarkably different.

For the African university, the problem of an identity has been a real one. To begin with, the African university is a product of the modern world, yet the environment which inherited it is largely traditional, pre-industrial, and agrarian. It is an environment caught in change from external forces - centuries of economic exploitation, colonialism, intellectual and cultural dominance. The small modern sector resulting from these forces has expanded over time, but remains exceedingly small compared with the traditional sector, and does not integrate with it. A product of the Western world, the African university was born a stranger to its own environment. Its main links were with institutions which were strangers to this environment and to the countries to which these universities belong. Thus, the African university became heir to a dual setting - the traditional African environment in which it was to be rooted and the modern sector from which it received its orientation. Making an appropriate response has been a challenge. For one thing, its borrowed models were for an industrial society with an entirely different milieu and could offer no real guidance.

What is this challenge and how can it be met? The African university has the twin responsibility of fostering cultural development and facilitating the achievement of modernization. This means that it must interlink its traditional and modern worlds. In a world that has been largely Eurocentric, cultural diversity is increasingly being advocated and accepted. African nations accordingly must foster and maintain their cultural identity so as to

be contributors to the world's intellectual and cultural stream. Thus, there must be opportunities for interaction between the traditional and the modern rather than a one-directional flow from the modern on the mistaken assumption that the traditional has no contribution to make. It is, no doubt, this fact that prompted those in the workshop on "Creating the African University" to assert that indigenous masters, albeit illiterates, be brought to the staffs of African universities in their specialties, for example, African art, music, poetry (Yesufu, p.84) to which may be added traditional medicine, oral history and tradition - in short, indigenous knowledge systems and technology. Such persons - men and women - are the custodians of Africa's cultural heritage. Within them lies much of the potential of Africa which has yet to be released. Thus, the African university meeds to become closely related with the traditional environment in which are embedded the roots of African culture and civilization - worldview, values, customs and traditions, creative works, knowledge, skills, technology. It must be a force not merely in preservation of the traditional culture but in its revalorization, and consequently, in bringing vibrancy to the traditional environment and pride in the cultural heritage.

The African university should meanwhile become a more effective force in the modern sector to which it has had its main efforts linked, although not with the requisite success. For example, in Africa, there has not been a correlation between education and economic growth and expansion as in the developed countries. Despite the surge in university education in the 1960's and 1970's, Sub-Saharan Africa of the 1980's still has such persistent problems as economic stagnation, mass poverty, high illiteracy, disease, and low productivity in agriculture which leaves the continent unable to feed

herself. Mazrui aptly describes the situation as "Westernization without modernization" (Mazrui, p. 201), that is, acquisition of Western lifestyles without the scientific and technological skills needed for modernization.

There are, however, several major obstacles to the African university carrying out the twin responsibility just described. Three of these are:

1. The volatile political situation on the continent;
2. The global negative impact from nations of the North;
3. The underfunding of the universities.

Let us look briefly at these. First, because of the volatile political situation, there has been considerable political interference in universities which has produced an atmosphere inimical to the ethos of higher education and has taken its toll on human and other resources needed for university development. For example, the outflow of high-level talent from the continent, many from the faculties of the universities, has almost neutralized the human resources development push the universities made during the 1960's and 1970's. Africa has the highest percentage of permanent movement of highly skilled personnel from countries of the South to countries of the North. Thus, the continent is critically short of the scholars and scientists needed to man the universities as well as the technologists, professional and managerial personnel who, with them, must ensure endogenous development of the continent and provide the necessary take-offs into the twenty-first century.

The second major obstacle is the global impact from nations of the North to which Africa's relationship is one of economic, cultural, intellectual and psychological dependence. A glaring example of this dependence on the North is in the area of research and development. Sandbrook

has pointed out that ninety-eight percent of these activities occur in the North. (Sandbrook, pp. 26-27) Opportunities for such research, even when Africa is the target, are channelled by those providing aid - Governments, multinational companies and donor Agencies of the North - to their universities and other institutions. Africa hardly benefits from such activities, which, for the most part, do not take into consideration either the continent's ecological or cultural situation. In fact, the consequences are often grave, the agrarian crisis in Africa today, despite many of such studies and projects in agriculture directed to Africa, being a good example. With the concentration of research in the North and the requisite funds to back it, research and extension in the universities on the continent are adversely affected.

The third major obstacle is that of underfunding of the universities. It somewhat relates to the second since multi-nationals dominate the continent. They represent a crucial potential source for private financing, but the fortunes they make are syphoned out and invested in their home countries rather than in Africa. As African universities have depended heavily on Governments for financing and there has been a decline since the 1980's in the ability of Governments to finance higher education, universities in this period have faced a grave problem of underfunding.

Several steps must be taken to redress the situation and facilitate the university meeting the challenge of endogenous development. The first is that of political reform which is an urgency for Africa. There should be silence from no quarters on this issue. Political structures and processes need to be evolved which will allow the masses to participate in choosing

political leaders who have legitimacy and can achieve political stability. African leaders must be sensitized to the relationship between the considerable amount of despotic rule and the resulting instabilities on the continent and the low level of development. They should be made to realize that the goals of self-reliance and self-sustaining development, as spelled out in the Lagos Plan of Action for the Economic Development of Africa, 1980-2000, are difficult, if not impossible to achieve, without a positive change in the political climate on the continent. Relations between Governments and universities could then be conceptualized as should be - in mutually cooperative terms. Concerted action of universities on the continent is necessary to buttress individual universities which have sought to speak against political repression and the stifling of individual liberties. This can be done through the AAU which should raise its voice when any of its member universities is assaulted for political reasons and also should endeavor to sensitize African Governments to the role of the university in society and development. African universities can not teach freedom of thought and inquiry, concepts of democracy and egalitarianism and encourage originality and initiative when incongruities with these principles and concepts abound in the environments in which the institutions function and the students live.

Second, concerted efforts should be made to have the locus of some of the research on Africa needed by foreign Governments, multinationals, and external Agencies shifted, with the requisite financial support, to African universities which could provide more insights and direction toward solutions of Africa's problems. Making this shift is crucial to producing fundamental changes in Africa by providing increased opportunities for African

researchers to design studies within the cultural milieu, and search for solutions therein, the results of which would give insights for refining or initiating further studies.

As to financing, in addition to that in support of research mentioned in the preceding paragraph, other new sources of funding for higher education in Africa need to be identified and funding for higher education diversified.

Removal of these obstacles should facilitate the universities in interlinking the traditional world and the modern sector. They should, for example, lead in the push for modernization which, to borrow from Abraham, would be free of the "ethnocentric predicament". (Abraham, p. 215). That is, must contribute to the modernization process which he has described as progressive increase in the general economic well-being of the population, social mobilization, and finding viable alternatives to alien systems through re-evaluation of indigenous institutions as well as traditional values and goals. They must probe, formulating where necessary new assumptions and theoretical perspectives, testing them in the traditional environment, thereby gaining new insights and knowledge for teaching, further research, and application of knowledge.

The other urgency is fulfilling the basic task of fostering cultural development and building pride in Africa's cultural heritage as well as facilitating meaningful interaction between those in the modern sector and those still in the traditional world. This task has to a large extent been neglected, in part, due to the complexity of the situation. There have been long periods of impact on indigenous African cultures by the forces of Western culture and Islamic culture. Some fusion of cultures has resulted, but African indigenous cultures still persist and influence the lives of the

majority of the people of the continent. Understanding this important aspect of the life of the continent is necessary to building pride in Africa's cultural heritage; to facilitating meaningful interaction between those in the modern sector and those still in a traditional world; to stimulating creativity; and to carrying out the struggle for cultural independence which is necessary for economic independence. Emphasis must be placed on the discovery, legitimation, and use of indigenous knowledge. Participatory research could contribute to this end. Among areas to be focused on are: African religions and values, African languages, agriculture, health, the problems and potential of women, and the reduction of poverty. Also to be understood are such African social organizations as cooperative work groups and cooperative savings groups, and their effects on productivity and mutual assistance.

Also, education must be re-oriented so that practical experiences and experimentation in traditional settings will be considered and made an important part of learning and the traditional environment and people important sources of learning. This will encourage experimentation and openness to new knowledge.

As more universities focus on Africa's problems, opportunities for universities and African professional bodies should increase. This would mean more South-South cooperation in the quest for solutions to Africa's problems. The community of African scholars which the AAU has endeavored to foster and unite is veritably of age. These scholars should certainly maintain relations with scholars across the globe, but they must endeavor to strengthen the community through increasing contacts among themselves, pooling and sharing resources directed to the solution of Africa's pressing problems.

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